

ART, GENDER, POWER, AND THE F WORD: AN INTERVIEW WITH COCO FUSCO

Coco Fusco is a New York City-based interdisciplinary artist, writer, professor, and cultural critic. For the past twenty years, her work has been presented around the world to much acclaim including in the Whitney Biennial, Sydney Biennale, Johannesburg Biennial, Kwangju Biennale, and Shanghai Biennale. She has published four books and is currently an associate professor at Columbia University's School of the Arts.

Over the past seven years, I have had the privilege of experiencing her work, hearing her lecture, and engaging her in dialogue. The questions posed during this interview originate from a conversation started in Fall 2003, when Fusco was the keynote speaker at the Society for Photographic Education conference in New Jersey (which I co-chaired). She spoke eloquently about her research concerning racial taxonomy in American photography, which resulted in the exhibition and book *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. Our most recent conversation occurred during her Fall 2007 Fringe Festival performance in Philadelphia and subsequent lecture at the University of Pennsylvania, where she shared her current research on gender and war.

COLETTE COPELAND: In Jean Fisher's essay from your book *The Bodies That Were Not Ours: And Other Writings* (2001) she writes that your work "employs a whole gamut of subversive tactics, from the scholarly text to parody, satire and 'shape shifting' that frustrate attempts at categorization and assimilation." Your artistic identity spans many dimensions—university professor, cultural theorist, curator, and performance and multi-media visual artist. How do the different facets of your practice inform/complement or compete with each other? Most people would be satisfied succeeding in just one of those fields. Is Fisher's assumption valid? What drives your desire to work across so many disciplines?

COCO FUSCO: The first artists I studied with in the 1970s and early 1980s were interdisciplinary in their approach. The person who I consider my mentor has written novels, run an underground press, made photographs, installations, experimental films, and sculpture. I learned to approach artmaking by starting with ideas and then figuring out what media would be best for the realization of the work. Many artists I admire—Allan Sekula, Mary Kelly, and Dan Graham come to mind—write in addition to making visual art. It is really not so unusual. I write in order to feel like I am thinking clearly, so writing accompanies just about everything I do. Because performance is ephemeral, many practitioners of the medium document their acts with written documents—chronicles, scripts, lists of ideas or actions, instructions, etc.

CC: We've spoken before about the role of research in your work and its importance. During your recent trip to Philadelphia, we briefly discussed how the art world mistrusts research within artistic practice. Perhaps this is due to the residual myth about artists creating in vacuums. Or perhaps

this could be attributed to the residue of formalism. Could you address this mistrust and then expand upon how your research becomes synthesized into your practice?

CF: My work explores social and political forces and processes—to be able to understand my material, I have to get out in the world and get into the library from time to time. Art involves thought and engages the mind, not just the senses. However, in the current anti-intellectual arts environment, it is not uncommon for artists and critics to demonize those artists who speak lucidly about their artistic practice. It never ceases to amaze me that many artists and critics continue to mystify creativity, so as to make it seem as though it does not involve the intellect. I am not so sure if there is a mistrust of research or what is perceived as intellectual or scholarly activity. My sense is that many artists see intellectualism as detrimental or even anathema to their imaginative or creative capacities—they have bought into a view of artmaking that is utterly romantic. To a degree, this is attributable to the myths about artistic creation taking place in a vacuum. But I also think that many artists are just plain insecure about their intellectual abilities or their capacity to verbalize their thoughts. Either that, or they are convinced that their public personae will be more attractive if they attribute their creativity to magic, intuition, dreams, or the paranormal. They are often terrified that they will seem less unique, and therefore less marketable as geniuses if their work is explained in relation to other social or cultural phenomena.

I do all kinds of research—sometimes I find myself fishing through archives and special collections, and sometimes I travel somewhere and just sit and listen to people and observe. Sometimes I seek out people to interview because of their experiences or knowledge of a subject. Sometimes I turn myself into a kind of apprentice and study with others. Sometimes I watch a zillion bad movies that I buy in supermarkets and discount stores. The method is determined by the project.

CC: You are a self-proclaimed feminist, and your work explores issues of gender and power, examining the body politic—women as victims of violence and in your current work, women as the perpetrators of violence. When and how did feminism become a dirty word and why are young women so reluctant to associate themselves with the "F" word? I find it extremely frustrating that my students have such skewed notions about feminism.

CF: I think there has always been resistance to feminism. It has never been a dominant discourse among women. However, I do think that there was a period in which more women in academic contexts and arts milieu felt comfortable identifying themselves as feminists. I do remember that when I started teaching full time in the early '90s, I was surprised to find that so many of my female art students were openly hostile to feminist ideas and feminist art, though they knew very little about feminist theory or the history of feminist art in the '70s. What they had absorbed were all the negative stereotypes that were circulating

in popular culture. I am not saying that all women students are anti-feminist, but I do think that in the '90s it became quite common for young women to believe that in order to be successful professionally, they had to distance themselves from any sort of identity politics. I often tell students that girls and young women do enjoy more equality in the early stages of their lives nowadays (thanks to feminism) and as a result they see less of a need for a feminist politics that is critical of the status quo. But I do think that women over thirty-five continue to experience social and economic inequities that are the result of our operating in what is still a patriarchal society.

cc: Let's talk about your latest work. What struck me about your Fringe Festival performance, "Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America" (in Philadelphia in September 2007), was how subversively language is used to rationalize horrific acts. Your monologue really keyed in on this and the "briefing" convinced the audience of the necessity of torture in the name of freedom and security. Could you speak about your choice of language for the monologue?

cf: My character is an active duty soldier and an interrogator. She speaks in the piece as a representative of the military in an official capacity. Therefore, it is her job to rationalize whatever the military does in the name of American interests and patriotic duty. I have followed the various investigations into prisoner abuse at U.S. military prisons since 2004, as well as studying statements and speeches by Pentagon, State Department, and Justice Department officials. I am amazed by their ability to make torture seem necessary, reasonable, and not violent. The semantic games they engage in were what inspired me to write the monologue in the way I did. The liberals who make up my audience generally believe that torture is bad, but they are not likely to have spent time thinking about the arguments that are being used to permit it, or the reasons why we allow it to happen through our passivity.

cc: Another aspect of the performance was how the surveillance cameras created a stage or spectacle, literally a theater of cruelty. I recently read Stephen Eisenman's book, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (2007). In his essay entitled, "Theater of Cruelty," Eisenman states that the Abu Ghraib images like the lynching images are rooted in the art historical and mass cultural tradition of theatricality and display. The acts of torture were performed for the camera. The perpetrators consciously performed their roles conscious of the camera as the "audience." In your performance, we (the audience) were implicated as we witnessed the interrogation on the surveillance screens. We watched with enraptured revulsion, unable to intercede. I'm not sure I have a question here—perhaps your thoughts on interrogation as performance.

cf: I have used video in most of my performances in different ways. For this work, I wanted to emulate the ways that the military uses video recordings and other media in interrogations and in briefings. Cameras are present at interrogations in military prisons: to produce as a record, to create documents to be used in training, and as a means of transmission of interrogation proceedings to intelligence analysts who watch via closed circuit television to determine whether sources are providing anything "actionable." PowerPoint presentations are



standard in military pedagogy and informational sessions so I combine both of these in my show.

cc: In your 2005 performance, in São Paulo, Brazil, "Bare Life Study," you performed as a military commander ordering "prisoners" dressed in orange jumpsuits to clean the street in front of the American embassy with their toothbrushes. How did this performance come about and what were the various public reactions to the work—from the embassy employees, to the public spectators, to the Brazilian police?

cf: I was invited to VideoBrasil in 2005 and they asked me to create a performance. I had just come from studying with Team Delta and was thinking about military policing as a form of disciplinary choreography. Being forced to clean prison areas with toothbrushes is a standard form of punishment in military prisons.

In terms of public reactions—the festival staff in Brazil were great about bringing press in and getting them excited about the work. I think that the main reason we were not stopped or arrested was because there were so many TV cameras and photojournalists. The coverage was generally positive and the event was co-opted by news commentators as a springboard for a discussion of the treatment of prisoners not only by the U.S., but also in Brazil. Of course, there were artists at the festival who did not like what I was doing because they did not like the idea of an art practice that engaged political issues.

We did not ask for permission in advance, knowing that it would not be granted, but we did plan everything very carefully. The consulate staff did not come out to speak to us, but they did call the Brazilian police to ask for protection. The police arrived but did nothing to stop us. They just stood around and chatted and took pictures of us with their cell phones. I heard from some Brazilians that the locals living near the consulate hate having it there because their lives are interrupted by its presence—the consulate was actually moved to a suburban area in

ABOVE

Still from *Operation Atropos* (2006) by Coco Fušco

São Paulo a few years ago because the Americans were afraid of being targets of violent demonstrations after 9/11. They moved to a building that used to be a pharmaceutical factory in an area that is really not designed for a lot of traffic. I also heard that the Brazilian police don't like the Americans because they are constantly calling and asking for protection when nothing is wrong. This probably explains why they did not stop us.

cc: In July 2005, you took a course led by former U.S. military interrogators designed for people in the private sector who want to learn their techniques for extracting information. The training involved an immersive simulation of being prisoners of war: you were ambushed, captured, searched, thrown in a pen and subjected to several interrogations. Afterwards, in a classroom scenario, the tactics used against you were analyzed and then you were taught to do what had been done to you. This resulted in the documentary film, *Operation Atropos* (2006), which was part of the most recent Whitney Biennial. Describe your motive for taking the course and some of your experiences.

cf: Originally, I wanted to take the course so I could have contact with real military interrogators in order to develop a performance character. The experience of training, though, was interesting enough in itself to make a documentary about it. Because I videotaped the training, I was able to study how the interrogators worked and how their behavior changed depending on whom they were with and what they were doing. I was also able to study how the members of my group each responded differently to the tactics that were used against them. I learned a great deal from the experience—probably most importantly, it made me consider just how complex interrogation is, just how difficult it is to determine what torture is, and how to prevent it from happening. It all has very little to do with sadism or the supposedly evil character of the military and a lot more to do with the stress, frustration, confusion, and conditions of uncurbed power that are present in so many warring scenarios.

One of the most interesting results of the experience and of making the video is that I maintained contact with my teachers and have had many more very illuminating discussions with them. Mike Ritz, co-founder of Team Delta, has come with me to some public presentations and has fielded lots of questions from audiences. I was expecting people to be more critical and even more hostile toward him. In general, the reactions have been more muted. Some audiences are visibly afraid of him. Others are angry with me for allowing him to express his position. Some really paranoid people get upset because they don't want to be seen by him. What surprises me the most is that in general, my audiences know very little about the details of what constitutes torture, how military interrogation works, and how military intelligence fits into warfare.

cc: You mentioned that during the filming, there was another film crew on-site from National Geographic, considering piloting a reality TV show based on the military interrogation camp. Entertainment culture is enamored with the military. TV shows like *24* glorify and rationalize torture as a legitimate way to get the “bad guys.” What effect does the media have on our perception of war as a game, war as spectacle/entertainment?

cf: Well, most Americans nowadays have little or no experience of real warfare—very few are soldiers or part of military families, and few live or work in war zones. They know war through games, through films, through TV shows. Those representations are sensationalist and trouble-free in that there is no real injury or death. The mainstream news media are limited in the amount of real death and injury they can actually show on television, by comparison to what we saw on TV news during previous wars. So yes, as a result of the limited view of war as a game, and of the War on Terror as a great adventure in which all sorts of government agents use all sorts of means, legal and illegal, to always win against the enemy, we don't have a very realistic view of war as a lived experience or of war as a road to death. I'd say that the dearth of realistic representations of the human dimensions of war result in our being ill prepared to judge the decisions of public officials about the war we are in, and also make it easier to recruit young people who are ignorant of the dangers involved.

cc: You mentioned that you are on deadline with a manuscript. What is your current writing project about?

cf: The book is an essayistic exploration of some of the issues in my performance, specifically about what it means for the state to instrumentalize female sexuality as a weapon in the War on Terror; and why I think that feminists have had such a hard time addressing the question of female sexual aggression.

cc: You have a young child. Has your role as a parent shifted your focus in your art practice? For example—the amount of international travel or the level of risk that you are willing to undergo for your work.

cf: When my son was a little baby, I was on leave from teaching and we traveled most of his first year. It was easier then to move around with him at that stage—he slept a lot and didn't really complain about being in strange places, though his little body had a hard time with environmental changes. Now he is less affected physically by changing environments. I continue to tour and to take him with me, but I have to be more careful about planning and also about finding things for him to do. Last summer we went to Colombia, Argentina, England, and New Zealand. Considering that he was only two years old, he did pretty well on the long flights and just wanted to know where he could find kids and animals when he arrived in each new place. He is racking up a lot of frequent flyer miles. I haven't really felt inspired to make art about being a mother or about my son—it's just not something I am interested in doing right now. In terms of risk—I don't think I have refused any invitations based on potential risk yet. I probably would think twice before taking my son to a war zone. That said, we are planning a trip to Israel and the West Bank for next Spring.

COLETTE COPELAND is a Philadelphia-based multi-media artist, writer, professor, and feminist whose work explores gender and the pervasive influence of media and technology on contemporary culture.